

# ***Tourists in German Uniform***



## **Experiential relationships, photography and the cultural legacy of the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa**

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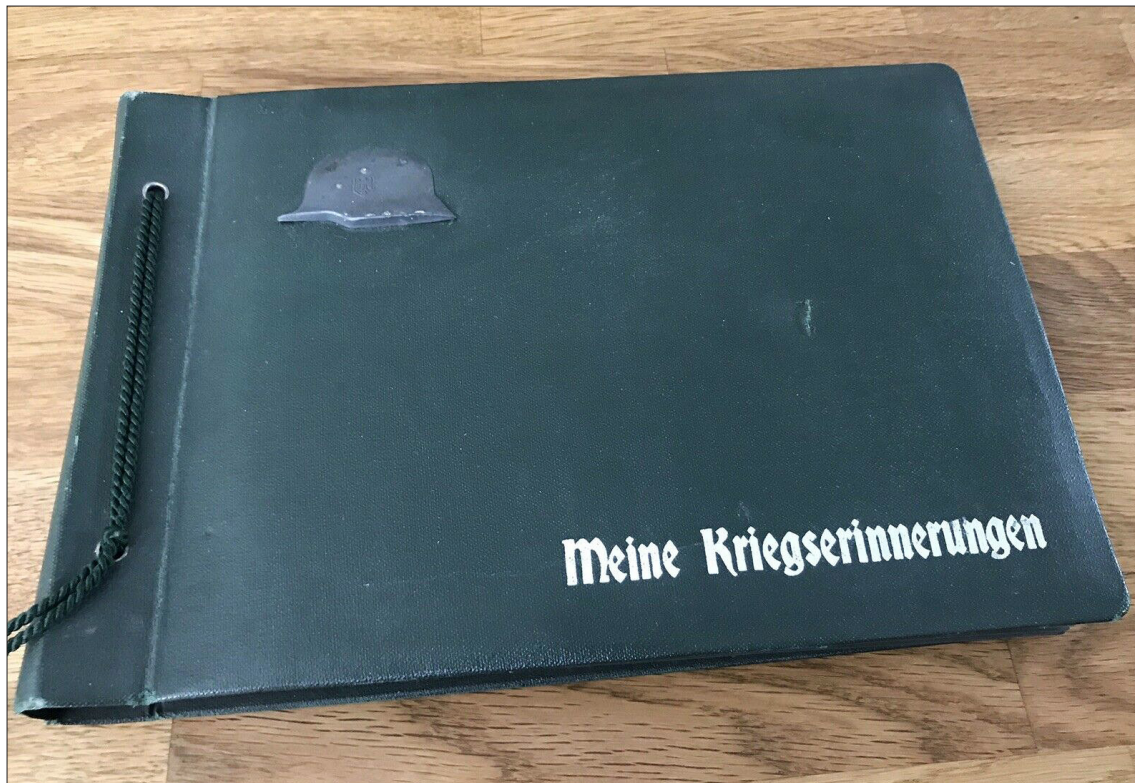
Experiential relationships, photography and the cultural legacy of the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa

Mike Seager Thomas

This paper is concerned with the relationship between the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa, during the campaign of 1941–43, and the places—particularly Italian colonial Libya—in which fighting took place, and what this can tell us about the soldier (the *Afrikaner*, as he called himself) and about these places at that time. Despite the undoubted hardships and danger experienced by the soldier in theatre, I contend that he (and very occasionally she) was very like a tourist, and that his or her experience of, and relationship to these places was like that of a tourist. For some perhaps this relationship was a way of managing such hardships and dangers, for others a conditioned reaction to travel, new landscapes and new environments (Umbach 2015, 394–95), but either way, it was real.

The principal evidence for this is photographic. By the outbreak of the war, it is estimated that there were seven million private cameras in Germany, and, with approval of the state—a fact demonstrated for North Africa by orders allowing the carrying of cameras but restricting *how* they were carried (McGuirk 1987: 40) and more generally by the huge numbers of private photographs taken and the modest and often poorly enforced restrictions upon what *could not* be photographed by a soldier (Torrie 2018: 136)—many of these went to war, with as many as 10% of soldiers carrying one (Boll 2003: 167). Unofficial *Wehrmacht* soldier photographers in North Africa ranged from the humble *Landser* to the highest-ranking officers in the theatre (including Erwin Rommel, commander of the *Afrikakorps*, and his Chief of Staff, Fritz Bayerlein) (Spayd & Dittmar-Bayerlein 2004; Steele 2015–16). Hundreds of thousands of photographs were taken of a very wide range of subjects, of which many have come down to us in photograph albums, with titles like “My service” (*Meine Dienstzeit*) or “My memories of the war” (*Meine Kriegserinnerungen*) (Figure 1), in which the places and things seen and the individuals met are often carefully ordered and labelled, and individually. (Dozens of unpublished war photographs taken by German soldiers in North Africa—and many taken in other theatres—appear for sale on German eBay every week, most broken from surviving personal albums and collections). In their conception and arrangement, these albums closely resemble holiday albums of the pre- and post-war periods. Indeed many continued in use after the war as holiday albums. In addition, the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa was issued with a





**Figure 1**

Typical photograph album cover entitled *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* ("my memories of the war").

Photo: eBay

*Panzergruppe Afrika* or *Panzerarmee Afrika* pocket diary (in 1942 and 1943, respectively) in which many recorded their day-to-day experiences. He also provided a market for locally produced commemoratives, such as the DAK (*Deutsches Afrikakorps*) silver ring (McGuirk 1987: 160–61), while many individual soldiers retained personal souvenirs of the theatre in the form of their service cap (the *Afrikamütze*) (e.g. Seager Thomas 2019: fig. 1.7) or *Afrikakorps* sleeve band, many of which were issued and survive, but few of which—as is clearly shown by the photographs highlighted here—were worn (McGuirk 1987: 154).

This "touristic" relationship is important for three reasons. Firstly, it provides us with an insight into the nature of the soldier himself, who, in conveying his very different individual interests and experience to us via his photographs, comes over in a range of quite different ways, few of which are "Nazi" or even particularly martial, and thus provides us with a useful counterweight to current views of the *Wehrmacht* and its campaigns in North Africa (e.g. Carell 1960; Fay 1945; Major 2008; Seager Thomas 2018 etc.). Secondly, the material that it generated, but particularly the photographs, has the potential significantly to improve our knowledge both of the material culture and operations of the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa (e.g. Seager Thomas 2019; 2020 in prep.). Finally, because of the different types of, and very varied interests of the individual "tourists", it provides an

unparalleled and therefore priceless record of the final gasp of Italian colonial Libya.

### *Tourists in Uniform?*

It will seem distasteful to some to characterize *Wehrmacht* soldiers, who fought, killed and in many cases died in the line of duty as tourists, but official Africa-theatre booklets and the diaries issued to the troops presented it as if it was a tourist destination, with photographs of the sights and snippets of tourist-type information (McGuirk 1987: 35, 54). There is also evidence that for many, a posting to North Africa was seen as exotic and more interesting than other possible destinations (e.g. McGuirk 1987: 53; Ringler 1970). As Rommel's Operations Officer in North Africa, Siegfried Westphal, remarked after the war, when recalling the many who volunteered for a posting there: "The magic of the orient has always attracted youth. There were dreams of adventures, of lion hunts, of rides on camels with the speed of an arrow, of brilliantly attractive dancing girls in refreshing oases" (Westphal 1972; quoted in Mitchelhill-Green 2017). It is also presented in this way in German literature of the period (e.g. Bayer *et al.* 1943; von Eisebeck 1943) (Figure 2).

In his *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry (2002: 2–3) identifies nine minimal characteristics of "tourism". The *Wehrmacht* in North Africa fulfilled almost all of these.



Figure 2.

"Oranges in abundance." From a February 1943 issue of *Die Wehrmacht* magazine. Two *Wehrmacht* soldiers are shown shopping in a Tunis market, just like any other tourists.



The first is that *it is a leisure activity*. War and particularly war in a harsh environment cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as a leisure activity but it is frequently characterized as comprising short bursts of activity interspersed with much longer periods of inactivity, which private photographs from North Africa show at times to have been filled with conventional leisure—seeing the sites, shopping, bathing, reading magazines and letters from home, etc. (Figures 3–17). Key here is that when off-duty, the *Afrikaner* was in North Africa (or on the way to or from Africa, in Italy or Greece), and for many of them this was an opportunity not to be missed.

The second is that *it entails journeying to and periods of time spent in a new place*. North Africa was a new place.

The third is that *the sojourn in the new place is intended to be short-term*. Though in the end many German soldiers stationed to North Africa ended up spending years away from home, again the *Wehrmacht's* campaign in North Africa—a posting to which was intended to last for 6 months only and which was perceived by some soldiers as a “little war” (Forty 1978: 29; Toppe 1952 [1991]: 103)—fulfilled this characteristic.

The fourth is that *the place is for purposes not connected with paid work, and offers some distinctive contrasts with work (paid or otherwise)*. The *Wehrmacht* was of course paid. Indeed, soldiers serving in North Africa were paid a supplement for doing so (McGuirk 1987: 34). Nevertheless, for most, it still conformed because it was not connected with *normal* work, which was not soldiering but whatever they did at home. At first even Rommel, a hard-nosed professional soldier, revelled in the unwonted sunshine and his morning bathes in the sea (Rommel 1953: 103, 106).

The fifth is that *a large proportion of society engages in it, and that new forms of provision are developed to cope with it*. I don't buy this as a characteristic of tourism: solo tourism is still surely tourism. But the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa conformed nonetheless, at least in terms of the proportion of society engaged, ultimately deploying over a quarter of a million men to the region. Only children, the elderly, and those groups pariahized by the Nazi state remained unrepresented.<sup>1</sup>

The sixth is that *the new place must be anticipated with pleasure, perhaps evoked by literature, films, magazines etc.* In this context, I have already noted Westphal's remark about “dreams of adventures, of lion hunts, of rides on camels with the speed of an arrow, of brilliantly attractive dancing girls in refreshing oases.” In his diary, Ralph Ringler, a junior officer in the 21st Panzer Division, was equally explicit: “Fantasy has a free rein,” he wrote. “Africa—that's tropical nights, palm trees, sea breezes, natives [...] Previously the doings of the *Afrikakorps* had been featured in the newspapers—by God

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1 By the end of the campaign some even of these were represented—for example in the 999 Light Africa Division, which was deployed to Tunisia, and was made up of so-called anti-socials such as political prisoners, convicted criminals and also apparently Jehovah's Witnesses.



how we would enjoy that!" (Ringler 1970; translated in Forty 1978: 29). Another, Hans von Luck, wrote: "We were highly expectant, almost eager for adventure" (von Luck 1989: 73). Following substantial investment in its transport and tourist infrastructure in the years immediately prior to the war, Italian colonial Libya had also increasingly been recognized as a viable international tourist destination (McLaren 2018: chapter 2), though how far this latter filtered through to future *Afrikaners* like Westphal, Ringler and Luck we cannot now know.

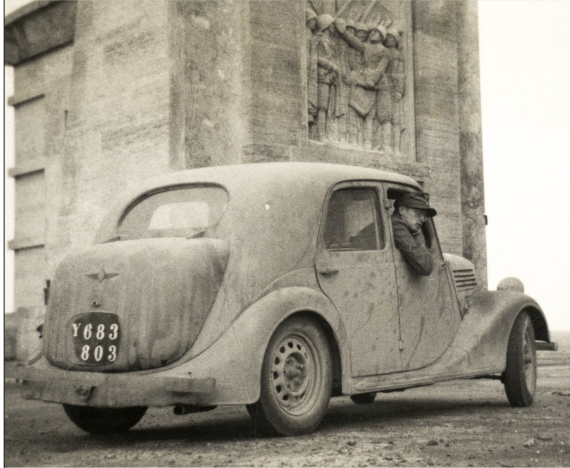
The seventh is that *it is directed towards features of the town and landscape that are out of the ordinary, which will usually be recorded and relived in some way*. Again North Africa, which to the *Wehrmacht* soldier consisted almost wholly of novel landscapes, architecture and people, was such a place. It is of course the latter aspect of this characteristic—the impulse to record the experience or place—that makes the tourist relationship so useful to us.

The eighth is that *it is constructed from cultural clichés* (Urry calls these "signs") *such as "typical Italian behaviour" and "exemplary Oriental scenes"*. This is evidenced by the recording by individual soldiers of very different but in their own ways emblematic things, such as the beach party (Figure 6, top), the destroyed tank or aircraft (Figure 14, upper middle right & bottom), or the Senussi or Berber in traditional dress (Figures 7 & 8).

The last, that *existing tourist objects be added to or modified by tourist professionals in response to changes in the visitor population*, is the only characteristic that was not fully realized. Certainly, local metalworkers rapidly adapted their wares to suit the tastes of the *Wehrmacht* soldier in the manufacture of the DAK ring, and—possibly—some other commemoratives as well (it is not always clear who made these latter and when) (Seager Thomas 2018: 12). The new Italian colonial hotels, such as the *Albergo del Mehari* in Tripoli, readily adapted to the new tourists (e.g. Reisch 2013), while the *Wehrmacht* established cinemas, provided a roving band (McGuirk 1992: 95), issued "tropical type" condoms (McGuirk 1987: 187) and, in Tripoli, designated a brothel staffed by Italian women for use by German soldiers. But there was no wholesale acknowledgment either by the *Wehrmacht* or—as far as we know—local entrepreneurs, of the needs of soldiers as tourists, as opposed to mostly young men away from home kicking their heels between orders.

### *The democratization of Libyan tourism*

As already noted, it is the varying interests of the *Wehrmacht* soldier that makes his (or her) record as a tourist in North Africa important and useful. Being German, he often carried a camera; and his photographs show him to have been an individual, or at least to have belonged to one of several distinct (social, educational or cultural) groups, as well a soldier of the *Wehrmacht*—even in those many cases where we have little or no other information about the individual soldier. He also contrasted with earlier foreign but also





Italian tourists to the region, who tended to be rich or middle class and/or Italian (McLaren 2018: chapter 2). The result was a massive expansion of the record—but particularly the photographic record—of the region (e.g. Figures 2–17). This record of course reflected the particular soldier's interests as a tourist—heritage, the beach (Figure 6, top), adventure, the soldier's lot (Figure 16), landscape (Figures 3 & 4), celebrities (Figures 12 & 13), etc. But incidentally it also took in details of the material culture of the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa and the regions it fought over, which together comprised the wider context of his touristic experience.

The different categories of tourism and their contribution to the record can be separated out as follows. It should be emphasized, however, that for many soldiers these categories overlapped. It should also be acknowledged that the circumstances of the war precluded some aspects tourism current then and later.

### Kraft durch Freude (KdF)

The German state leisure organization, the *KdF*, organized cheap mass tourism with a Nazi flavour, providing such activities as cruises, trips to parks and cultural events, group hiking and skiing trips, with the dual aim of democratizing tourism and inculcating in the tourist National Socialist values (Baranowski 2004). Images of its activities typically show its members engaged in sport, travelling, often in the countryside, and luxuriating in the sun. Despite the terrible violence associated with it, *Wehrmacht* service in North Africa shared a lot in common with this. First and foremost it involved *group* travel, much of it through the landscape, which was not just viewed but experienced directly (cf. Urry 2002). This experience was very similar to experiences promoted by the *KdF*. Secondly, it involved *group* activities, both during the fighting and between times. Photographs of *Wehrmacht* soldiers in North Africa at leisure, larking about on the beach or relaxing in the sun, have a “feel” very similar to some of those taken on *KdF* holidays (Figures 5 & 6). Finally, both also entailed physical exertion, although in the case of the soldier this often ended up in real hardship.

The by-product of this type of tourism was huge numbers of photographs taken along Libya's *strada litoranea* (Figure 3), of vehicles laagered in the desert and of the North African landscape generally (Figure 4), which provide a useful source for the study of regional topography and architecture (Figure 3, upper middle left & bottom right), and—incidentally—*Wehrmacht* transportation and other matériel (e.g. Figure 3, upper middle left). Also represented are photographs of *groups* of soldiers relaxing, on leave, and travelling to and from North Africa (Figures 5–6 & 17 top right), the

### Figure 3.

On the road. Views on and from the *strada litoranea* (the *Via Balbia*). Parts of the *strada litoranea* are now dual carriageway. The *Arco dei Fileni* (upper middle left) was blown up by the Gaddafi regime in 1973.







importance of which again lies less in their intended subject, the soldier at ease, than in their wider context: the conditions shown, the changes we see in these over time, the uniforms worn at different times and in different places, the trains, ships, aircraft and lorries in which the soldier was transported, and so on.



**Figure 5.**

Two *Wehrmacht* men enjoying the sun on makeshift deck chairs .

### *Sightseeing*

What is viewed and recorded by the sightseer tends to be conditioned by the tastes of the individual, and so it was with the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa. Commonly displayed tastes amongst these included heritage, anthropology (Figure 7 & 8), architecture (Figure 9–10) and the classic viewpoint (Figure 11). Though they could also be lumped with other types of tourism, I would also include the “celebrity” (usually a General) (Figures 12 & 13) and visual spectacles such as crashed aircraft, destroyed tanks and war-damaged buildings here (Figures 14). The expression of these tastes by the soldier could be specific—old Tripoli, the *Arco dei Fileni* (Marble Arch) (Figure 3, upper middle left), the road down the escarpment above Derna, Rommel (Figures 13) or the soldier’s own General (Figure

**Figure 4.**

North African landscapes photographed by the *Wehrmacht* soldier. The intimate relationship of large numbers of *Wehrmacht* soldiers with the desert generated a record unparalleled before and for many years afterwards. The colour photographs here are from Erwin Rommel’s photograph collection held by NARA.







12), the Matilda tank (Figure 14, upper middle right), etc.; or generic—the romantic ruin, the “Arab” (Figure 7), Italian colonial architecture (Figures 9–10), any high ranking officer. Both forms are extensively represented in the photographic record left by the *Wehrmacht* soldier.



**Figure 7.**

*A Wehrmacht soldier with a nomad.*

Prior to the war, the Italian authorities in Libya invested massively in the development the colony's tourist infrastructure. In Tripoli, the castle, the city walls and the Arch of Marcus Aurelius were reconstructed, and outside the town, the classical cities of Leptis Magna and Sabratha cleared and reconstructed (McLaren 2018: 83–85), and visitor hotels and museums built (*ibid.* 2018: 51–52, 175–81). All of these were visited and photographed by soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* (see Pietz & Wilkins 2005: 24; Spayd & Dittmar-Bayerlein 2004: 123–27). Indeed, more than any other, it is his photographs of these that demonstrate the existence of an explicitly touristic relationship between him and the regions through which he passed. Because their focus in North Africa was on reconstructions of interest only to the tourist, however,

**Figure 6.**

Strength through Joy—the *Wehrmacht* soldier relaxing. Clockwise from top: on the beach; a piano in the desert; photo opportunity at the *Arco dei Fileni*; another group by the sea; on leave at the *Albergo del Mehari*, Tripoli; Christmas at Agedabia (labelled and dated 23.12.1941). Photographs such as these, which recall pre-war images of people on holiday, well convey the everyday humanity of the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa, and help to place him in a full and therefore real context. They sometimes also provide details of uniforms, places, etc. The photograph of the two *Luftwaffe* men at the *Albergo del Mehari*, for example, is one of a set which show many details of the exterior of the now demolished hotel.







and because these survived the years more or less unaltered, they are the least useful of all those that have come down to us. More useful are glimpses amongst them of visitor hotels, such as the Italian rationalist *Albergo agli Scavi di Leptis Magna*, which have not survived, and, in those cases where in the perfection of his cultural tourism the soldier did not exclude them from his photographic record, the occasional uniformed bystander.

By contrast, his photographs of the local population and the region's architecture are enormously useful.

Photographs taken by the *Wehrmacht* soldier with an anthropological bent show local men, women and children from across the region in traditional (then *everyday*) dress. They show them in the town and the country. They show the hovels and ragged tents in which many of them lived. They show their fly bitten livestock. They show carpet sellers (Pietz & Wilkins 2005: 43). They show local women allowing themselves to be fondled by young German soldiers. They show soldiers of the Libyan colonial army (Figures 7, 8 & 17, upper middle right). Such images are useful for two reasons. Firstly, because they fill out the partial picture of the Italian colony left to us by pre-war tourism and the colonial administration, and secondly, because many of things that they show are now long gone. Much the same is true for the architecture recorded. Much of it has gone or been altered beyond recognition (Fuller 2007 [2010]: 216–17). The *Arco dei Fileni* (Figure 3, upper middle left), a major piece of Italian colonial architecture and one of the principal sights on the *strada litoranea* was blown up by the Gaddafi regime. Tripoli's Sidi Hamuda Mosque, originally Ottoman but reconstructed by the Italians, made way for Green Square, and the Italian modernist *Albergo del Mehari* (Figures 6, lower middle left & 10, upper middle right) for a modern tower block of the same name (now the Radisson). The *Uddan*, once Tripoli's premier hotel, has been orientalized. Many other buildings of interest have also been wrecked or destroyed—not least during the recent civil war (al Warfalli 2018)—and for some of these, as with some of his anthropological studies, the record made by the *Wehrmacht* soldier (Figures 9–10 & 14, top, middle left & lower middle right) is the best or the only one.

Finally, for those interested in the *Wehrmacht* itself and its campaigns in North Africa, the most useful photographs taken by the sightseer are those showing Generals (Figures 12 & 13) and—to a slightly lesser extent—the spectacle of war (Figure 14). The usefulness of individual photographs showing these will depend on their wider context. Generals, for example,

#### Figure 8.

Anthropological tourism in Libya. Clockwise from top: a *Wehrmacht* soldier at a nomad camp accompanied by Libyan soldiers of the Italian colonial army; *Wehrmacht* soldier, perhaps with sex-worker; man in a coffee house; nomad women; town-dwelling women. While there is a good deal of cultural continuity in North Africa to this day, in terms of dress and behaviour, what the *Wehrmacht* soldier recorded differs enormously from the present day fashions of the region. Huge numbers of *Wehrmacht* soldier images such as these add considerably to culturally restricted colonial and pre-war tourist records.



**Figure 9.**

*The Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale, Tripoli.*

came and went and photographs of them are useful chronological markers. For example, Gustav von Vaerst did not arrive in North Africa till December 1941 and therefore any pictures in which *he* appears must be of that date or *later*. Walter Neumann-Silkow, on the other hand, died in December 1941 and therefore any pictures in which he appears must be of that date or *earlier*. This chronological logic also applies to the General's uniform (Figures 13) and those objects that became spectacles of war, except that in the later case, because these did not always leave the battlefield after they were destroyed, it is only possible only assert that a photograph showing one must be of its or *later* date.

### *The English Patient and adventure tourism*

In early 1942, the Hungarian desert explorer László Almásy (the English Patient), then attached to the *Abwehr*, led an expedition deep into the desert to deliver two spies to Assiut, on the Nile (Gross *et al.* 2013). In so far as the expedition involved exploration and an enhanced danger from the

**Figure 10.**

Architectural tourism. Italian colonial architecture. Clockwise from top: a *casa cantoniera* on the *strada litoranea* west of Tobruk; the Governor's Palace and the *Albergo del Mehari*, Tripoli; the church and *casa del fascio*, Baracca (modern Farzougha); the *Banca d'Italia*, Tripoli. The *Albergo del Mehari* and the *Banca d'Italia* have been demolished. The Italian Governor's Palace (later the People's Palace) is now a museum (Harding 2011). The *cantoniera* (Rommel's HQ and a hospital), and the church and *casa del fascio* of Baracca, also survive albeit in modified form (Capresi 2007: 229; Pallud 2012: 164).













**Figure 12.**

Snap of Generalleutnant Karl Böttcher of the 21st Panzer Division.

environment (as opposed to enemy action, which for many soldiers in North Africa was part of their everyday life), the experiences of its members closely compare to those of the modern-day adventure tourist (e.g. Patterson 2017: 137–38). For the *Wehrmacht* soldier, such experiences were minority ones and as compelling as they—and the extensive record of them—are, they add little to our knowledge his life in the North African theatre. Their use rather is in the contribution they make to our knowledge of landscapes traversed.

### *Self-centred tourism*

The final stage in the democratization of tourism is the breaking down of the barrier between everyday life and tourist practice. This is manifest in the last of the touristic categories separated out here—"selfie" or self-centred tourism. In this, the tourist abroad, in this case the *Wehrmacht* soldier, comes to see and record his everyday experience as if it were a tourist experience. For the modern tourist this might be him or her eating a plate of *spaghetti alle vongole*, his or her hotel room, his or her hire car; for the *Wehrmacht* soldier, it was *his* foxhole (Figure 15), *his* platoon drawing water from a well, *his* tank,

**Figure 11.**

Classic sightseeing. Places visited and photographed included the particular and the generic. Clockwise from top left: the cemetery and well at Capuzzo, one of the classic sights of the *strada litoranea*; a Benghazi souk; the port of Bardia; Ottoman-style, *Forte Giudice*, in Nofilia (which appears to have disappeared from the photographic record in January, 1943); a typical Libyan street scene.



**Figure 13.**

Rommel's uniforms—and particularly the hats he wore—are a useful chronological marker. Prior to going on sick leave in September 1942, he wore a cap with a pronounced crown (top). After his return in October, he wore a cap with a less pronounced crown (bottom) (McGuirk 1987: 25). An additional chronological marker in the upper photographs is the (absence of) the soutache from the other soldiers' tropical peaked caps, which was ordered removed in July 1942. Together these show that the upper photograph dates to some time between July and September 1942 and the lower, after October 1942.





lorry or Volkswagen, and—all too often—the graves of his comrades (Figures 6 & 16). In so far as it gives a personal insight into how the *Wehrmacht* soldier experienced or saw his service, for the student of the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa, the potential usefulness of such material is self-evident. It also provides an abundance of priceless data on *Wehrmacht* uniforms and matériel.

Surviving photographs comprise mostly camp scenes and portraits and portrait groups of unknown *Wehrmacht* soldiers, but every subject is covered, while the portraits, depending on where and when they were taken and how they were framed, often show much more than the individual soldier. The range is well summed up in Dal McGuirk's (1992) *Afrikakorps Self Portrait*. Included are photographs of individual bits of kit from machine guns to the *Afrikamütze*; group activities from drawing water (Figure 16, middle left) and repairing tanks to medical parades and meals; and individual activities from reading newspapers and repairing uniforms to cleaning weapons and otherwise preparing for battle (Figure 16, top left). And there are some—not many—images of battle itself. The overall impression is of something very human and everyday. This is obviously useful in terms of our understanding of the *Afrikaner* himself. Whether or not it is also “tourism”, is for the reader to decide.

### *Problems with the record*

The interpretation of the record and in particular the photographs taken by the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa is not without problems, any more than analogous records from other regions in which it was deployed—and for the same reasons (cf. Torrie 2018: 133–34). The record that comes down to us is frequently a composite, incorporating images by photographers other than the soldier who compiled it—not least those of the *Propaganda Kompanien* (PK) (Boll 2003: 167–70). It may not be complete, having been self-censored or censored at a later date by the soldier's family, and may therefore show how the soldier's experience was seen (or preferred to be seen), rather than how it actually was (cf. Frei & Hoffmann 2009: 10), a preoccupation with particular aspects of it and a rejection of others undermining the reality of the whole. Many photographs too are out of order and few retain an interpretatively meaningful context—such as a label or provenance—beyond what is visible in the photographs themselves. Others still are incorrectly or falsely labelled.

The interpretative implications of these problems, however, are contingent upon what the data are to be used for and how. For those interested in war or the war in North Africa generally, *any* editing of the record might be a problem. For those interested in material culture, date is important, but not necessarily details of the soldier's wider experience. For those interested in the soldier or soldiers generally, *his* or their self-censorship is an integral part of the record, and so on.

In order to realize its full potential in the face of these problems, the record of the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa needs to be worked over









**Figure 15.**

Photograph from an album compiled—but for the most part probably not photographed by—an *Uffz.* Joseph Senger. This photograph of him, which shows him in a foxhole with a steel helmet, an item of equipment, which in North Africa was only issued to particular groups, such as infantry and flack troops (McGuirk 1987: 66, 169–70), usefully situates the photograph album of this otherwise unknown soldier. We know Senger's name from a 1945 POW postcard included in the album (Figure 17, bottom right).

thoroughly. Every period photograph made by a *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa is a artefact of the campaign. Whether it shows an Italian colonial building, a member of Almásy's expedition gazing across the empty desert, or a group of *Landzers* around a home made Christmas tree (Figure 6, upper middle left), it is the truth, but by itself it is unlikely to be the whole truth and may not answer many questions. But by looking at and cross-referencing large numbers of them and particularly groups of them, we will begin to acquire a fuller understanding of them, placing in an interpretatively viable context both the individual photograph and the group, just as we would any other category of material culture addressed in this way. To generalize about the record, to assert that its integrity has been compromised and that it is

**Figure 14.**

The spectacle of war. Clockwise from top: a sunken tanker in Tobruk harbour with Italian Navy HQ in the background; a knocked out Matilda tank; Bardia again; the wreck of an Italian Fiat CR4 biplane at an unknown location in the desert; the *Via Roma* (Omar Al Mukhtar Street) and the damaged *Albergo Italia*, Benghazi. The surviving part of the Tobruk Navy building was later the palace of King Idris I. It has since been raised. Bardia church has also been raised (Pallud 2012: 228–29) as has Benghazi's *Albergo d'Italia*. The damaged building shown in the *Via Roma*, was repaired after the Second World War, but bombed again during the recent civil war (see al Warfalli 2018).







therefore not worth analyzing, or to write it off as tainted and the analysis of it as politically incorrect, as some have analogous material from other regions in which the *Wehrmacht* operated, would be an abdication of interpretative responsibility.

### *Case Studies*

Access to *Wehrmacht* soldier photographs from North Africa is inhibited because *most* are privately owned. The following examples were chosen because they were accessible to me at the time of writing (the present paper was written during the 2020 UK coronavirus lockdown): because I possess digitized versions of them, or because scans of them were available on sales websites; and/ or because they illustrate some of the themes discussed above. They include individual and small groups of related photographs, and whole albums.

#### *Individual photos and small groups*

The first two photographs were taken in Naples by soldiers on route to North Africa. No information is available about the first; the second is from an album attributed to a soldier of the 15th Panzer Division broken for sale on German eBay. Both show *Wehrmacht* soldiers in front of Carlo Cocchia's *Scuola Napoletana di Equitazione XXVIII Ottobre*, an important Italian modernist building, which was partially destroyed by allied bombing 1943. In the first, there are no leaves on the trees in front of the building, and a tank crewman can be seen wearing his black woolen Panzer uniform (Figure 17, top left). It is likely therefore that it shows the 5th Light Division, which was deployed to North Africa in February 1941, when it was still cold in the city. The second shows a soldier in tropical uniform, and leaves on the trees in front of the building (Figure 17, top right), confirming its identification with the 15th Panzer Division, which was deployed to North Africa the following April, after southern Italy had warmed up. Both photographs are important because of their depiction of Cocchia's building prior to its bombing. In addition, the first shows Italian colonial troops, whose presence in Naples it dates, and the second a rare Dutch pith helmet, the use of which by 15th Panzer, it confirms (cf. McGuirk 1987: 141).

The next photograph belongs to a group of three, from three different sources, all stamped "ПОГАШЕНО" on the reverse side. They show a newly promoted young officer against a wall and visiting a nomad encampment, probably in Tunisia (Figure 17, upper middle) (see also Seager Thomas 2019: fig. 14, middle). (We know he was newly promoted because there is a shadow around his lapels from which his NCO tresses had only recently been removed). These photographs are of interest because they show the officer

#### **Figure 16.**

"Selfies". Everyday activities, portraits and camp scenes.

wearing different officers' belts, because he still wears his other ranks cap, an intermediate model, which is rarely discernible in period photographs, and because he is shown in, and because of the visible details of, the nomad encampment. They are also of interest because the prints (not the photographs) are Ukrainian fakes.

The last is another single photograph (Figure 17, lower middle left). Its interest to us lies in a pencilled label on its reverse side, which places it in "Ghilarza", Sardinia. One of the men shown in the photograph has a soutache on his cap, and these were ordered removed more than a year before the *Wehrmacht* occupied Sardinia (the soutache is an inverted "V", the colour of which indicated the wearer's branch of service); there are also a lot of what look like flies in the picture—a common scene in the North African desert during the *Wehrmacht's* campaigns there; and the landscape visible looks like desert. The label, therefore, is most likely wrong. Perhaps its writer confused "Ghilarza", Sardinia, with "Ghirza", Libya (where there was an emergency airfield); or maybe one of the men in the photograph later served in Sardinia, and he or someone labelling the photographs for him somehow mixed them up. There is now no way of knowing. Such incorrect or false labelling is very common. Two other photographs shown here are also wrongly labelled: that showing Baracca (Figure 10, bottom), which is labelled "Barce" (cf. von Eisebeck 1943: 64), and that showing the cemetery and well at Capuzzo (Figure 11, top left), which is labelled "Arco de Filene" [sic].

### *Album 1*

The first album was put together by an otherwise unknown senior NCO in what the photographs suggest to have been a transport unit. It comprises over three hundred photographs, of which 30 were taken in Italy (including six in Naples harbour), six at sea en route to North Africa, 124 in North Africa, and 24 in, and flying over Greece, apparently on leave. The format of the photographs—rectangular in most of the photographs taken before the unit's arrival in North Africa and square in most of those taken afterwards—shows them to have been taken with at least two cameras, and two members of the unit are shown carrying these.

The photographs from North Africa are dominated by portraits of the unknown NCO and other members of his unit (36%), most of them taken off-

**Figure 17.**

Case studies. From top left: Carlo Cocchia's *Scuola Napoletana di Equitazione* in February 1941 (note the trees in the road, which are without leaves and the black Panzer uniform worn by the soldier on the left); a *Wehrmacht* soldier in tropical uniform outside the same building in April 1941—the trees now have leaves; "fake" print; rare variant of the "*Afrika*" sleeve band known only from this photograph (cf. Weber 2015); Joseph Senger as a POW (the *Wehrmacht* eagles have been removed from his and his neighbour's tunics indicating that this photograph was taken after Germany's surrender); as much a landscape a portrait, a colour slide taken by Erwin Rommel of his Chief of Staff Arthur Gause; "Ghilarza" or "Ghirza"—an apparently mislabelled photograph; the reverse of the "fake" print to the right.







duty. Indeed, the vast majority of the North Africa photographs, irrespective of their apparent emphasis, show members of the unit. Collectively, therefore, they are best grouped under *selfie* tourism. However, other categories of tourism outlined above are also represented. After the portrait, the most common subjects shown are the street scene (17%) (Figure 11, top right & bottom left) and local—Libyan, not Italian—people (16%) (28% if you include street scenes which show people). Next come animals and views of the road and the landscape (both 6%) (Figure 3, top right), the beach (5.5%) and architecture (5%) (Figure 10, lower middle right). A conventional interest in heritage is vouchsafed by his photographs from both Italy (where he visited Pompeii) and Greece (where he visited the Acropolis), but not in North Africa. Otherwise, of least interest to this soldier during his service in North Africa were senior officers (0%), graves and burials and the spectacle of war (both 1.5%), though the last two are significantly represented in photographs showing his earlier service in France and Poland.

Because of his preoccupation with himself and the other soldiers in his unit, and—possibly—because he was not a front-line soldier, his album is not a very important resource. A number of individual photographs are useful. For example, included are photographs of a Benghazi souk which was not much photographed (Figure 11, top right) as well as other useful street scenes; there are a handful of good uniform shots (Figure 17, lower middle right); and several photographs—unusually—show stark billet interiors. Above all, however, the album has integrity and shows unambiguously how one *Afrikaner* chose to record the time he spent in North Africa. This was not Nazi or martial; but focused on people, primarily his unit, but also the local Libyan population.

### *Album 2*

The next group comprises what are believed to be Rommel's own colour slides, taken by him, or of him using his camera. The collection comprises 160-odd photographs, most of them showing North Africa. How complete the collection is and how representative it is of the General's overall colour output is unknown. We know, however, that he took other, black and white photographs, and that the story the colour photographs have to tell us is unlikely to be complete.

The majority of Rommel's existing colour photographs are views of the landscape (over 50%) (Figure 4, upper middle right & bottom). Port scenes are also well represented (18%). Camp scenes (many also landscapes) comprise about 10% of the collection, portraits 6.5% (Figure 17, bottom left), street scenes 5%, architecture 5%, guns 4% and local people 4%. (Unlike those in the album of the unknown NCO discussed above, his street scenes are largely devoid of people). Only very sparsely represented or not represented at all are the beach, graves, heritage and the spectacle of war. As a colour photographer, therefore, he can be grouped with those tourists with a taste for



direct experience of the landscape rather than sightseeing *per se* or everyday experience.

The principal interest of these photographs is that they—or most of them at least—were taken by the General himself, and provide an additional, albeit partial insight into *his* war. Rommel was obviously captivated by the desert but he was also a sensitive observer of it, realizing in his images its emptiness, its horizontal relationships and its scale. It is also striking, and in a way demystifying, to see images of the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa in colour (cf. Pietz & Wilkins 2005).

### *Album 3*

Album 3 comprises 188 photographs, said to have been taken by a member of the 5th Light/ 21st Panzer Division (identified from vehicle markings visible in the photographs). Shown in them are Bardia, destroyed British tanks, the Division's own tanks, rare battle scenes, the *strada litoranea* and soldiers at rest and play, many of them showing clear details of uniforms and vehicles (Virtual Grenadier 2020). Such an album—were it original—would have had considerable potential for study. During negotiations with its present owner, however, it came out that the original period collection had been added to over the years from a variety of sources and its integrity as a source lost.

### *Album 4*

Joseph Senger (Figure 15) was a junior NCO, most likely an infantryman. His album comprises 71 photographs of which nine or ten were taken in France and 16 in North Africa. He is also shown in his tropical uniform at home and in a POW camp (Figure 17, bottom right). As noted above, it is not certain that Senger took any of the North African photographs in the album. All but three—a snap of Rommel and two landscapes—show him, so we can be sure that it is *his* collection, but the finishes, sizes and edges of the prints show them to belong to at least five different sets of prints. A handful of photographs are missing from the North African section of the album but even so there are barely enough prints to make up a single roll of film, let alone five. Senger therefore was either a very bad photographer, lost most of his photographs, or acquired the photographs from one or more other photographer.

More even than the album put together by the senior NCO discussed above, Senger's North African photographs are dominated by selfies (81%) but, given the nature of the collection, there is no reason to suppose that this proportion in any way represents *his* take on North Africa and his service there.

The photograph of Rommel (6%) and the two landscapes (12.5%) are probably the most significant in this respect, for, unlike the portraits, they were not self-selected for inclusion in the album. They indicate one aspect

of his outlook as a tourist: he was a sightseer. The collection as a whole, however, does tell us something of Senger and his service in North Africa. It is the photographs, which indicate to us that he was an infantryman (Figure 15). They show him with and without corporal's stripes. (It is not completely clear in the photographs, but it appears that he was promoted rather than demoted). Also noticeable in them is the man's appearance, which coarsens over time (cf. Figures 15 & 17, lower right). A tourist he may have been, but this *Afrikaner's* service in North Africa was no holiday. Finally, in the POW photograph (Figure 17, lower right), he is shown denazified, the eagle having been stripped from his bleached tropical tunic and a wound badge, visible in some earlier photographs, missing.

### *Conclusion*

To summarize, the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa had a relationship to the region analogous to that of the tourist. One by-product of this was a huge photographic record, of which parts have come down to us, which can provide useful insights into the nature of the soldier himself, the material culture of the *Wehrmacht* in North Africa and aspects of the landscape, anthropology and material culture of the region. The record, however, is not without problems, and in order fully to realize its potential, it will be necessary to study it more thoroughly—just as we would any other category of material culture.

To date, the use to which this material has been put has been largely illustrative and focused primarily on the day-to-day activities of the *Wehrmacht* soldier (McGuirk 1992; Mitchelhill-Green 2017) and—to a lesser extent—*Wehrmacht* material culture (McGuirk 1987: 132–77; Seager Thomas 2019). It is clear from these studies, however, and from the foregoing, that the potential of the material is much greater, obvious topics for ongoing study being the embodiment of the *Wehrmacht* soldier in North Africa (outside of our pre-existing understandings), the detailed study of his material culture, and aspects of the places and cultures he recorded.

But to do this we need the record and this is fast being destroyed. Ongoing work, therefore, must focus first of all on saving this. Collectors must stop buying and dealers stop selling *broken* albums and collections, or—at least—maintain and publish a digital record of the photographs' original contexts. Then the material has to be recognized by *academics* for the priceless resource that it is. If this is done, we will then be able to begin the systematic analysis and cross-referencing necessary fully to realize its enormous interpretative potential in the different spheres outlined above.

### *A note on the period photographs*

Under US and EU (and for most of the photographs used here, UK) copyright law, copyright on private (as opposed to state) photographs lies with the photographer till death, when it passes to his or her heirs for 70 years.



The period photographs used here *could*, therefore, remain in copyright. Because the photographers and/ or their heirs are unknown, however, they are effectively in the public domain. (Claims by archives, museums, private collectors and commercial photograph agencies to the copyright of such photographs are mostly spurious). Three of the photographs used here are off eBay (cover top left, and 6 upper middle left, and 16 middle right); one was previously published in *Die Wehrmacht* magazine (Figure 2) and one in Bayer *et. al.*'s *Balkenkreuz über Wüstensand* (cover, middle); one is off Wikipedia ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wehrmacht\\_vehicle\\_on\\_Via\\_Balbia\\_in\\_front\\_of\\_Derna\\_in\\_Africa\\_campaign.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wehrmacht_vehicle_on_Via_Balbia_in_front_of_Derna_in_Africa_campaign.jpg)); twelve are from Jim Payne's *Through Their Eyes* (<https://www.throughtheireyes2.co.uk/>; see also <https://www.flickr.com/photos/46719559@N04/albums>) (Figures 3 upper right, upper middle right & lower middle, 4 top & lower middle right, 8 middle right & bottom right, 10 lower middle right, 11 top right & bottom left, 16 bottom right, and 17 lower middle right); and three are from NARA (Figures 4 upper middle right & bottom, and 17 bottom left) (accessible internationally via [http://www.digitalhistoryarchive.com/store/c1/Featured\\_Products.html](http://www.digitalhistoryarchive.com/store/c1/Featured_Products.html)). The remainder are from period prints currently in my possession. All have been retouched and enhanced by me for inclusion here, which may or may not affect their copyright status. The albums discussed come from Jim Payne (*Album 1*), NARA (see also Steele 2016) (*Album 2*), Virtual Grenadier (*Album 3*), and myself (*Album 4*). I thank all those who have made photographs available that have been used in this paper.

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